



UNIVERSITY OF
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Friday's Feature

By

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Ornamental vegetables add color to the winter landscape

Vegetable gardens are familiar to all of us, even if we do not grow vegetables for our own use. But, did you know that there are many vegetables that are attractive and colorful enough to use as winter annuals? Incorporating vegetables into the landscape or using them as decorative container plants for porches and patios is a great way to add color and interest to our winter gardens.

Many vegetables have ornamental, as well as food value. In fact, when tomatoes were first introduced to Europe, they were believed to be poisonous and were used only as ornamentals. Using vegetables as ornamentals is not a new idea. Potagers, or decorative kitchen gardens, were a part of the elaborate gardens at Versailles during the 1600's.

Ornamental cabbage is probably the most popular and widely used of the ornamental vegetables. But there are many other leafy vegetables that will perform well in our area. Dr. James Gibson, Assistant Professor at the UF/IFAS West Florida Research and Education Center, has been instrumental in evaluating ornamental vegetable cultivars for Northwest Florida. His research has shown that many cultivars of kale, mustard and Swiss chard are worthy of a place in our home landscapes.

According to Dr. Gibson, kale cultivars should be planted in late fall for winter and early spring interest. Forage kales were originally used as a source of fodder for cattle. 'Lacinato', 'Red Bor', and 'Red Russian' are three of the varieties used by botanical gardens today as ornamentals. 'Lacinato' grows to a height of two feet and has thick and crinkled dark blue-green foliage. 'Red Bor' achieves a height of three feet and possesses dark purple ruffled leaves. 'Red Russian' is an interesting variety that grows to three feet. As the cooler weather sets in, its foliage changes from a blue-green to a purple-red color.

Mustard cultivars should be planted in early fall for best results. 'Red Giant' mustard, one of the more popular ornamental vegetables, has large bronze colored leaves with bright white midribs. Other mustards that have performed well include 'Early Mizuna', 'Komatsuna', 'Misome' and 'Miike Giant'.



Red Giant mustard offers highly ornamental foliage for the landscape, but can yield tasty greens for the table as well.

Another ornamental vegetable that performs well in Northwest Florida is the Swiss chard cultivar ‘Bright Lights’, a 1998 All-American Selections Winner. This variety is a favorite because of its multiple colored stems and crumpled foliage.

As with many vegetables, these ornamentals can be started by seed. Seeds should be started approximately six to eight weeks prior to setting them out in the landscape.

In the landscape, choose a planting site carefully. These plants enjoy full sun. Due to their robust foliage, plants should be adequately spaced in order to allow for good airflow to minimize disease problems. Space plants approximately 18 to 24 inches apart.

In general, ornamental vegetables are not tolerant of water stress. Allowing the plant to dry out can cause the leaves to turn yellow and drop off. Be careful with the fertilization also. Excessive fertilization will prevent good color formation. However, not enough fertilizer will result in yellowing or defoliation.

Tip of the Week: To get a potted holiday cactus or poinsettia to bloom for Christmas be sure it is not getting light at night. Starting approximately October 1st, put the plants in a dark area that receives no light from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m. Keep putting it in the dark at night for one month for the cactus, six to eight weeks for the poinsettia. Place the plant in its normal growing area during the day so that it gets sufficient light.

Theresa Friday is the Residential Horticulture Extension Agent for Santa Rosa County. The use of trade names, if used in this article, is solely for the purpose of providing specific information. It is not a guarantee, warranty, or endorsement of the product name(s) and does not signify that they are approved to the exclusion of others.